



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom

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Virtual

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Sharon Kleinbaum, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you, Chair Turkel and Vice Chair Cooper, and thank you to all of you here today. I had the opportunity to visit Ukraine last year in my personal capacity and was inspired by the Ukrainian people's resolve in the face of such needless suffering.

Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine should come as no surprise, as the Russian government is using the same repressive playbook that it has used for years inside Russia itself. Several draconian Russian laws outlaw the most basic fundamentals of religious freedom. Russia's 1997 religion law sets strict

registration requirements for religious groups and empowers state officials to impede and monitor their activities. Russia's so-called Yarovaya Law bans preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites. Russian courts have also increasingly designated religious groups as "extremist" without adequately defining the term or "terrorist" without providing evidence of terrorist activities or the promotion of violence. Russia is also Europe's biggest enforcer of blasphemy, consistently fining and detaining people for comments and activities perceived as "insulting religious feelings." These are just a few examples of the many ways that Russia has used broad, vague legislation to suppress religious activities and groups of which the state does not approve.

The prosecution of religious groups and other vulnerable communities in Russia has not slowed down despite the war. 2022 was one of the harshest years of repression for Jehovah's Witnesses, with Russia sentencing more than 40 to real prison time and detaining or imprisoning more than 100 for their peaceful religious activities. Muslims continue to make up a significant number of Russia's political prisoners, with the international human rights organization Memorial documenting the cases of hundreds of Muslims who have been imprisoned for their religious affiliations, activities, and identity.

On top of that, the Russian government has launched a sweeping crackdown on civil society forcing several human rights organizations that monitor and report on religious freedom to suspend their operations and flee the country. In April 2022, the Memorial Human Rights Center was shut down after a court ordered its closure under the country's "foreign agents" law. Other organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Moscow Helsinki Group, were also forced to suspend operations inside the country, making it more difficult to monitor and document freedom of religion or belief and other related human rights violations.

President Putin has also weaponized religious nationalism and pushed through new, stricter legislation that further curtails freedom of religion or belief. President Putin has made his vision of "faith and traditional values" a rallying cry for the war, scapegoating the LGBTQI+ community. Last December, he signed into law a bill that criminalized "LGBT propaganda" and the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations." Religious communities – which comprise members of various sexual orientations and gender identities – have the right to support their members publicly and express views about sexual morality freely without fear of reprisal. Using the LGBTQI+ community and its allies as political fodder to rally domestic support is yet another tactic often used by despots to hold onto power.

I look forward to hearing from our panelists about all these developments. I turn the floor back over to you, Vice Chair Cooper. Thank you.